

National Fostering Agency

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

The National Fostering Agency is an independent fostering agency that operates on a national basis. This inspection relates to the work carried out by the South East, South West, North West and London areas from their office based in Uxbridge. The agency provides short-term and long-term placements and within its range of fostering services the agency includes the placement of unaccompanied young people seeking asylum and children with special needs. The National Fostering Agency operates a 24-hour on-call duty and emergency service. Supervising social workers are on call to their foster carers on the same basis.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement where children and young people are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

Good: An agency where children and young people, including those with the most complex needs, have their individual needs met and their welfare safeguarded and promoted. They make good progress and receive effective services so they achieve as well as they can in all areas of their lives.

Requires improvement: An agency that may be compliant with regulations and observing the national minimum standards but is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of a good judgement. It therefore requires improvement to be good. There may be failures to meet all regulations or national minimum standards but these are not widespread or serious; all children's and young people's welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

Inadequate: An agency where there are widespread or serious failures which result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

National fostering agency is an outstanding independent fostering agency, where the needs of young people come first. The overall emphasis of the care provided focuses on promoting the individual needs of young people many of whom have complex and special needs. This helps them to feel safe, make secure attachments and thrive. There is a culture of active participation and meaningful engagement with young people in this high quality service

Foster carers and young people receive an excellent service from a highly competent and professional staff team. Foster carers have high aspirations for the young people in their care acting as champions to ensure they are provided with access to activities and resources that will help them to reach their full potential. Carers are pro-active in advocating on behalf of the young people in their care. Outcomes for young people

are significantly good and once settled they make exceptional progress in all areas of their lives, such as education, behaviour, social and life skills. Young people report they regularly attend a wide range of stimulating social and educational activities. Such opportunities allow them to extend their horizons and develop new social relationships. It is evident that such experiences contribute positively to their individual self-confidence.

The assessment of foster carers is thorough, with comprehensive reports presented to the fostering panel within set time scales. Reports are detailed, robust and demonstrate a rigorous assessment of carer's strengths, abilities and their capacity to parent effectively and to understand how young people's experiences and living away from home impacts on their lives. The fostering panel is experienced and works effectively to ensure clear recommendations about carers are made. These procedures maintain carer's interests and enthusiasm to foster and ensure the safety and wellbeing of young people.

Young people and carers are carefully matched; the agency strives to seek as much information as possible prior to a placement, to ensure appropriate matching. Commissioners report, 'This is a strength of the agency, placement stability is good and the matching process is thorough and realistic.' Consequently, young people enjoy settled placements; placement breakdowns are few with young people enjoying positive relationships and make outstanding progress.

The leadership and management of the fostering agency is strong, delivered by experienced practitioners who are passionate, committed and dedicated to achieving the highest possible outcomes for young people. The management team maintain a 'hands on' approach to managing the service; this enables foster carers to feel inclusive and an integral part of the 'team around the child'. Foster carers' comment that they feel appreciated, respected and supported at all levels in the agency. Supervising social workers have manageable caseloads; this enables them to provide extremely good support and guidance to foster carers. There is a culture of on-going training and professional development within the service and an expectation that carers and staff access opportunities to extend their knowledge on a regular basis. The service has developed highly innovative and quality assurance systems that provide managers with regular updates on how all areas of the service is operating. The agency has highly effective working relationships with commissioners to develop services in response to changing and demographic trends. This ensures that carers' recruitment is targeted to meet the diverse needs of young people.

Experiences and progress of, and outcomes for, children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

Young people make exceptional personal and social progress from their starting points, benefitting from highly stable and appropriate placements that strive to meet their specific physical, social and cultural needs. Placements are tailored to meet individual needs, with additional support where necessary. A high degree of placement stability indicates young people are appropriately matched. Placement disruptions are few with many young people remaining in placement under 'staying put' arrangements. Where young people move on it is usually part of a planned move. A significant number of young people, who were initially placed with carers on a short-term basis, have settled well and these placements have become long-term. A care leaver said, 'I arrived at my foster carer and have not left, she has even built an extra room to ensure I can stay as long as I wish, she is my family.'

The agency has experienced an increase in the number of sibling group placed amounting to 34% of actual placements, many of these are long-term and stable with young people feeling cherished and experiencing a true sense of belonging and the right to a positive family life. Foster carers in conjunction with the agency advocate strongly on behalf of young people to ensure families 'stay together'. An independent reviewing officer reported, 'Foster carers are very child focused and impressive in their ability to provide high quality care for large sibling groups with high levels of need.'

Young people attendance at school and college is excellent, with most achieving over 95% attendance and a number of young people regularly achieving 100%. As a result of this the level of educational attainment is significant. Young people do extremely well in their end of year tests, the majority reaching level 4 in maths and English. 98% of young people in year 11 were entered for public examinations, with a significant percentage achieving 5 or more A-C grades at GCSE. A number of young people have gained university places, with three young people entering medical school. Foster carers have high aspirations for all young people and advocate on their behalf to ensure their learning needs are appropriately met. This results in young people having genuine aspirations for their future. This is a significant achievement for some young people who had previously struggled to engage in education. The fostering service strives to learn from research and seeks to be forward thinking to ensure increased educational outcomes. To this end they have introduced the role of an education champion, who is a practicing teacher and foster carer. She advises carers on the education of looked after young people and birth children and current changes taking place. This ensures that foster feel empowered to advocate and share consistent and successful relationships with educational professionals to promote the young people's educational development and achievements.

More recently the agency has commissioned an independent education audit, the resulting information is used to inform the development and progress for all young people and is integral to the education training for carers and supervising social workers.

The educational achievements of all young people are recognised and celebrated. The in-house magazine regularly reports on achievements culminating in the annual award ceremony.

Young people have the opportunity to express their views, wishes and feelings in a variety of ways. For example, through feedback about their carers for their annual reviews and contribution to their own looked after reviews. Their views are central for many aspects of service development. For example they receive support and training to enable them to contribute to the agency's recruitment and training programme for carers and staff. The young people's champion meets with the senior management team to discuss changes in the agency and to put forward ideas for development. They have a role in presentations to local authorities, commissioners and other professionals. In addition to the direct work that supervising social workers undertake with young people there are a range of consultations and feedback forms. More recently young people have participated in the Leading Improvements for Looked after Children review (LILAC) with one young person invited to join the team. The agency is in the process of implementing Unicef – 'The Rights of Child Ladder of Participation', once completed by the young people, it will form part of the agency's mission statement. This ensures that young people feel valued, listened to and know their views matter.

Young people said they exercise choice over many aspects of their lives and are regularly consulted by their carers on, amongst other things, culinary preference and social activities. They feel their views are valued in family decisions over such things as holiday destinations and family recreation time. This supports their sense of belonging to their foster families

They take part and enjoy a range of fun and educational activities. These include scouts, basketball, horse riding, music, dance and the performing arts. Involvement in these activities helps to make and sustain friendships, develop new skills and increase self-confidence.

Young people are supported to understand the importance of health and from early learn about healthy living. Carers receive training on health and nutrition, enabling them to understand and take a more holistic approach to health. The well-being of each young person is given a high priority in the agency. Foster carers ensure that any identified physical or mental health issues are appropriately addressed. The health of young people is carefully monitored, with regular health checks. Carers ensure that all young people, including those with complex health needs have access to any additional services, to promote good health. Training is provided to carers to enable full understanding of individual health needs, carers are vigilant and fully engage with services such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).

The agency clearly recognises that many young people placed with them have experienced the insecurity associated with a chaotic lifestyle and therefore find it difficult to establish routines and adhere to behavioural boundaries. The agency provides a significant amount of direct work with foster carers and young people. These include work with in-house therapist, access to psychological support and the work undertaken by supervising social workers, often assisted by experienced support workers. Foster carers receive supervision and support to understand

behaviours and how develop clear boundaries that are consistently applied. Positive and respectful behaviour is reinforced with praise and rewards, sanctions when applied are relevant and appropriate to the misdemeanour. Many young people respond positively to this approach with incidents of inappropriate behaviour decreasing. This has resulted in improved outcomes, placement stability and significant improved behaviour both in school and the community. One young person discussed how her behaviour had changed over the course of her placement, mainly due to the commitment of her foster carer, 'She listened, understood, showed me love and she refused to given up on me, even at the most difficult times and really cared about me. I would not be studying law now if not for her.'

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

The agency recruits from all walks of life. This inclusive approach enables them to meet the diverse, complex and challenging needs of young people. They have excellent strategies for the recruitment of carers. Managers work effectively with commissioners to ensure they recruit carers who are able to meet the changing and evolving needs of young people.

Good marketing techniques are deployed within cultural and religious communities to ensure they reach out to prospective carers in an appropriate and respectful way. This has led to the successful recruiting of carers across a range of cultures and ethnicities.

The service has high expectations of its foster carers and recruits only those who are willing to develop the necessary skills to meet the needs of a range of looked after children. Procedures for recruiting carers and staff are robust and ensure unsuitable individuals do not gain access to young people in care. The assessment process is thorough, with highly skilled assessors determining in a timely manner clear evaluations on applicants' capabilities, competence and attitude to fostering.

The Skills to Foster programme, subsequent support and additional training ensures that foster carers have a comprehensive understanding on the needs of young people placed with them and the necessary skills and knowledge to meet those needs. A range of professionals, including care leavers participate in the delivery of training, giving insight into the often complex and challenging behaviours of young people. Only those that successfully complete this training, proceed to panel for approval.

There is an established culture of training and development in this agency and expectations that carers during their fostering career will, continually update their knowledge and skills. An annual comprehensive training and development programme is in place that includes training in key areas, such as attachment, child development, safeguarding, health and behaviour. Foster carers confirm the standard of training is excellent and enables them to have good insight into the needs and difficulties many young people experience. The agency often sources bespoke training to further educate and support foster carers to better understand the needs of young people. This ensures that placements previously at risk of

breaking down are sustained.

A foster carer commented, 'The agency will go the extra mile to ensure we are well supported with our children, training is never an issue, when I requested specific training, within two days I had a choice of eight different courses.' Carers and staff frequently undertake joint training and regular support groups provide opportunities for healthy discussions and the sharing of good practice. Having successfully completed their TSD training, many carers have sought to increase their understanding and knowledge through further study. For example, level 3 diplomas and bespoke mental health training. The agency celebrates the board range of expertise foster carers bring to the service. Foster carers take part in the training for new carers and give talks to managers on a range of cultural and religious issues. More importantly the use of the carers' buddy systems and mentors ensure they never feel they are caring in isolation.

There is careful matching and close attention paid to young people's individual needs. A referrals team work hard to ensure detailed information is obtained to ensure that carers can meet the needs of young people from a variety of backgrounds. This rigorous matching process is effective in ensuring that young people are placed with carers who have the right experience and resources for their care.

The constitution and membership of the fostering panel is strength of the agency. The panel has an experienced and knowledgeable chair and the panel composition is culturally appropriate to reflect current needs. The central list of members is in accordance with regulations. The panel is effective and provides rigorous scrutiny on the cases presented to it. The approval and reviewing functions of the panel provides an effective quality assurance function, ensuring that appropriately trained and vetted foster carers care for young people. The independent quality assurance manager provides advice and written feedback to assessors on the standard of their reports. This feedback provides a suitable check on the quality of assessments and the practice of the agency. The administration of the panel is efficient, with members receiving the papers in good time enabling effective scrutiny prior to panel. Decision making is equally prompt and effective providing the decision maker with clear recommendations from the panel.

Foster carers are extremely complimentary and appreciative of the support and guidance their whole family receive from the service who, according to one carer, 'Are always available and willing to help, there are brilliant.' Carers feel valued and respected by the agency as important members of the team around the young people. They are particularly enthusiastic on the professionalism of supervising social workers and the agency generally. They report that social workers provide them with regular opportunities to reflect on their practice. Carers confirm that the ethos of the agency 'is to take as much time and use all resources' to ensure they are supported to maintain placements for young people. The result of this investment in carers is shown by the stability of placements and the retention of experienced long term foster carers, many of whom have been fostering for, in excess of 10 years. A carer said, 'working for the agency has completely changed our lives for the better.' Another commented, 'They know us as people and take time to listen and value the experience we have.' Carers said the key role they occupy in the agency is

recognised and their views and opinions on the progress of the young people in their care is valued. One of the strengths of the agency is the 'local approach' taken by senior managers, who take time to meet and consult with carers and young people on aspects of the agency's development and business planning.

This enables carers to feel inclusive and have a voice in the development of the service. In addition to supervising social workers, the agency employs a range of professionals to support carers and work with young people. Team support workers, undertake direct work with young people, including supporting those out of education, contact sessions with birth parents, social activities and training in independent skills. An in-house therapist supports foster carers working with young people who have challenging behaviours looking at strategies to understand and manage these. This support enables carers to continue providing an excellent quality of care. The agency provides exceptional support to foster carer's own children, recognising their importance for the stability of family life. Carers value this recognition and are appreciative of it.

The agency works effectively with professionals and commissioners to ensure best possible outcomes for young people. Commissioners report that managers are proactive in seeking information; communication is open and transparent. Placement stability is excellent with few breakdowns. Social workers and independent reviewing officers are positive in their comments on the work of the agency and the progress made by young people with their foster carers. For example, a professional said, 'Placements are excellent, he has received positive feedback from young people. Foster carers are experienced, knowledgeable and advocate strongly with local authorities to ensure care planning meets the specific needs of their young people.' The overwhelming feedback from professionals is of excellent communication, placement stability and impressive outcomes for young people.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

A Strong safeguarding culture and excellent mechanisms to promote young people's safety and welfare are in place. The primary aim of the service is to provide placements where young people feel secure in their foster placements and live out their childhood without fear. As a result young people feel safe in their home.

Safeguarding underpins all policies, procedures, and working practices. The agency excels and is pro-active in developing and reviewing its practices and has created a safeguarding committee that meets regularly to discuss all incidents and concerns relating to young people in its care. Messages from serious case reviews are scrutinised and best practice is identified and shared with staff and carers

Stringent efforts are made to ensure carers receive effective information about a young person before a placement is made and risk assessments are extensively used to identify any areas of potential concerns. The needs of the fostering family are always considered prior to placement. Individual behaviour management plans are

developed to provide carers with strategies to address any behavioural issues. The agency's therapist works closely with carers to support understanding of behaviours and the challenges faced in supporting young people. Strategies are put in place, with foster carers receiving supervision from supervising social workers. When necessary, individual time with therapist or psychologists is available for reflection. Foster carers prepare a safe care policy which addresses all aspects of household routines and safety. These are kept under review by carers and supervising social workers to ensure they remain relevant and effective. Supervising social workers and managers are pro-active in ensuring that young people and fostering households are safe. Effective action is taken where immediate risk or serious challenges to foster carers are identified. For example a foster carer said, 'My social worker identified the risks posed to my family from the young person and made a decision to end the placement.' another carer reported, 'The challenges from X were having a detrimental effect on my marriage, my social worker recognised that the well-being of my family had to come first and moved on our young person in a planned way.'

Vetting procedures for staff and panel members are thorough, ensuring only safe and suitable individuals work with young people. The process for recruiting, assessing and approving foster carers is robust, ensuring the service only recruits safe carers. Foster carers speak positively about the safeguarding training. They said it gave them good insight into the impact different forms of abuse can have on the development of young people. The agency provides a comprehensive range of training for carers, covering issues such as sexual exploitation, female genital mutilation and radicalisation.

The agency has identified and commissioned a number of bespoke training packages when foster carers have identified a particular need to enhance their understanding and support of young people.

The agency helps young people to learn about personal safety in a number of ways. For example, using drama workshop to work with adolescent young people to recognise and understand grooming behaviour and sexual exploitation. Younger children attend 'stranger danger workshops. From the feedback received, young people both looked after and birth young people spoke very complimentary about the learning achieved. All young people who contributed to the inspection had a strong sense of being safe, secure and well cared for. One young person said, 'I am not allowed out on my own, my carers have explained why this is to me, and anyway I enjoy doing things with my family.' Another young person said, 'I am happy here, they love me and looked after us, this is my first real home.' All young people have a strong sense of belonging with their foster families and this contributes to the success of placements. Young people confirm they know who to talk to if they have concerns and are aware of how to make a complaint. They are comfortable and confident feel listened to and can influence positive change.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: Outstanding

Leaders and managers are visible, approachable and passionate about the work of the agency. This is both at strategic and operational levels of the service who are committed to providing a service of excellence and quality. Consequently young people benefit from a child focused service which places them at the heart of service delivery. There were two requirements and two recommendations made at the inspection in 2011. Ofsted receives notification of all significant events in a timely manner; information on the regulator is available to young people through the children's guide. Training of foster carers is appropriate and completed within twelve months of approval with continual development a mandatory expectation of all carers.

The agency has excellent quality assurance systems that permeates all aspects of the service's work and contributes to continuing improvement. For example the introduction of 'a rag rating' system, which effectively monitors the stability of placements. This enables the agency to flag up placements where additional intervention and support is required to avoid placement breakdown. In addition, due to of inspirational and innovative practice, significant improvements have been made, ensuring young people make exceptional progress, have positive experiences and outcomes, together with good memories. Systems are in place to track the progress and outcomes for young people, these, include the independently commissioned education audit.

Positive and highly effective consultations with stakeholders, young people and foster carers, enables the manager to provide detailed and analytical reports to senior managers. These reports enable the agency to develop a thorough and responsive annual report used as a tool to drive forward improvements in outcomes for young people and service provision.

An experienced and suitably qualified management team lead this service. Managers use messages from research, demographic patterns and trends to ensure the service is at the forefront and responsive to changing needs. Consultations with stakeholders together with analysing and monitoring changing patterns and trends determine the specific needs of local authorities for placement. For example the recent increase in large sibling groups and parent and child placements. More recently the service has been engaged in creating a bespoke service with a local authority to bring more challenging young people back into their locality in a planned way. Commissioners are overwhelming positive about this agency and comment favourably that the service is one of excellence, is proactive, transparent and consistently achieves excellent outcomes for young people over and above expectations.

The service benefits from having a highly motivated and experienced staff team. Staff retention throughout the service is high, with the agency having a clear policy of promoting from within. They hold high aspirations for all young people, are enthusiastic, and focused on continually improving outcomes for young people. Staff feel their views are valued and they are actively involved in the development of the service. They keep abreast of the changing and developing field of childcare by regularly accessing training opportunities and messages from research. Supervising

social workers have manageable caseloads, enabling them to provide good levels of support to foster carers.

The agency recognises the importance of young people having opportunities to express their views, have fun and develop positive relationships with each other and their community. The service recognises the importance of involving foster carers birth children in these opportunities, particularly for long-term placements where young people see themselves as siblings. Young people have made an impressive contribution in charitable work. An example of this is their engagement with professional chefs to produce a cookbook, the proceeds of which support national and international charities. Young people enjoyed this fun experience, and additionally it enabled them to give something back to society enhancing confidence and self-esteem. More importantly for one young person it led to the securing of a trainee chef apprenticeship, greatly improving his life skills. Young people are involved in the skills to foster training, have produced a DVD used for recruiting new staff and play a key role in presentations on the agency to stakeholders and commissioners. Young influence their day-to-day care through their active participation in foster carer's annual reviews. All of these promote a sense of belong to and engagement with the agency.

The Statement of Purpose gives clear and comprehensive information about the agency. The service has a number of children's guides, devised with young people. This means that information is available in a child focused and informative way enabling young people to know what to expect from the service. The Fosters Carers Charter is implemented in practice. Carers are encouraged and have clear avenues, through the Carer's mentors system and carers' representative to raise concerns. Fosters carers comment positively on the level of consultations with them and say their views are taken seriously. The responsible individual is said to maintain an open door policy and has an impressive knowledge of the foster carers and the progress of young people. Outcomes from any investigated complaints contribute to the service's robust approach to improvements.

About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to inform children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards and to support services to improve.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for the inspection of independent fostering agencies.